

Women Bakers Working Again

Initiative

USAID is working with the World Food Program to provide women with the means to earn a living and to help feed a quarter of Kabul's population. This bakery in a west Kabul neighborhood is back to providing women with a reliable income. Twelve women rotate functions in one room, weighing dough, kneading it, rolling it out, and shaping it into the long oval flatbreads that Afghans prefer. The inside of the bakery is dark, lit only by the orange glow of the oven's fire. The women press holes with their fingertips in the flattened loaves to let the steam escape, then place the dough on paddles and push them into the woodburning oven.



Photo by Alejandro Chicheri

“Even though we only have bread and tea for dinner, we are still free!”
– Nafisa

Results

From sunrise to sunset, these widows bake well over 2,000 loaves of bread a day. This bakery is one of 21 such businesses supported by coalition aid; there are more planned for construction. The women working here still count on American wheat, but many bakeries are already financially self-sufficient. Despite their hardships and poverty, these women all have smiles on their faces as they speak. They tell us, “This is not a time to weep, but to work. If we continue to be sad or depressed, who is going to take care of us and our children? We have responsibilities.”

Challenge

For women in Afghanistan, the Taliban years were a time of deprivation and second-class status. Most of them were banned from working outside the home. This was particularly hard on widows. There are an estimated 50,000 war widows in Kabul alone who need to work to support their children. Under the Taliban, the widows' bakeries were usually permitted to operate. Still, there were arbitrary arrests and beatings of women working at them, and bakeries were shut down at whim.

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